

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE 2 *post*

LOS ANGELES TIMES
6 October 1985

1964 U.S. War Game an Accurate Forecast of Failure in Vietnam

By NORMAN KEMPSTER,
Times Staff Writer

WASHINGTON—In the late summer of 1964, a few months before the United States began sustained bombing of North Vietnam, a group of senior U.S. military, diplomatic and intelligence officials met in a small room in the Pentagon for a strategic "war game" designed to indicate what would happen if America escalated the fighting.

The results of that secret test, now being made public in detail by the official who conducted it, offer a tantalizing hint that tragedy might have been avoided if President Lyndon B. Johnson and other American leaders had not ignored the findings.

With a team headed by Gen. Earle C. Wheeler, then chief of staff of the Army, playing the role of North Vietnam, the officials conducted a political-military simulation that, in retrospect, seems eerily prophetic—predicting ultimate failure for a policy that, nevertheless, was adopted a short time later.

"Hanoi did not knuckle under to American pressures" in the war game but instead "counterescalated by pouring more troops into the south," according to former State Department official Robert H. Johnson. "The game ended with the U.S. team continuing to bomb North Vietnam while the situation in South Vietnam became worse than ever."

Moreover, the war game was part of a larger study that also predicted mounting domestic opposition to a U.S. policy of escalation.

Johnson, now professor emeritus of international relations at Colgate University, headed a task force that sifted through the alternatives facing U.S. policy makers in the months before the United States moved irrevocably into the Vietnam War. Drawing on recently declassified documents, Johnson describes the project, which in-

cluded the war game, in an article in the fall issue of Foreign Policy magazine.

Though references to the investigation have appeared in the past, Johnson's account contains much additional detail, which he was barred from revealing before the declassification.

The irony of the prescient report's falling on deaf ears is intensified by the fact that it was conducted by orders from Walt W. Rostow, then chief of the State Department's policy planning council. Rostow went on to become President Johnson's national security adviser and a leading supporter of increased U.S. involvement in the war.

The test results—which were read at the time by Rostow and probably by President Johnson, according to the former State Department official—concluded that military escalation would not intimidate Hanoi or save the Saigon government.

Despite that advice, the President initiated a policy of gradual increases in U.S. military involvement. A decade later, Saigon fell.

The study was conducted by officials of the State Department, Defense Department, Joint Chiefs of Staff, CIA and U.S. Information Agency. It was a closely guarded secret, taking place during the 1964 presidential election campaign, when Lyndon Johnson assured the public that he would never send American troops to fight an Asian war.

Robert Johnson reports that the study was intended to test the proposition that U.S. bombing of North Vietnam would convince the Hanoi regime that it could not afford to continue the war. In theory, he said, escalation was intended to make the Communist regime surrender in face of the

danger of losing its industrial base to U.S. air strikes.

The committee doubted that premise from the start, and the results of its war game, in which the U.S. Army chief of staff made it clear that he would not knuckle under if he were in the place of the North Vietnamese military commanders, buttressed that skepticism.

However, Johnson admits, the committee was unable to suggest any other strategy that might have prevented the ultimate Communist victory.

"The study suggested that bombing and other actions against North Vietnam did not offer the United States a way around the difficulties with which it was grappling, with declining success, in South Vietnam," Johnson wrote.

"At best, these actions offered only an uncertain hope of a breather during which Washington and Saigon might be able to get a grip on problems that they had so far been unable to solve.

"The committee also suggested that the United States might get caught up in a situation in which the South Vietnamese and Laotian governments might crumble in the midst of escalation, thereby destroying the political base for the U.S. actions.

"The committee (also) realized that escalation could create serious domestic political problems."

Johnson said he has been assured that his report was read at the highest levels of the government but, despite its arguments, "policy makers felt that they had no alternative. They were not prepared to accept a negotiated solution that, it was widely recognized, would very likely lead to an early Communist takeover."

"Washington has not yet discovered how policy makers can be induced to take such planning exercises seriously, especially when the conclusions are not designed to fit their preconceptions," he said.